

Performance, Politics, and Monuments in the Ancient Maya Plazas of El Palmar

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In early complex societies, a plaza was a crucial space for community building. Theatrical performances in the plaza not only acted for political legitimation of rulers to the public but also provided opportunities for people with different backgrounds to negotiate social and political positions. This paper examines how non-royal elites' experiences in the central plaza were materialized in a city's outlying areas. In so doing, I compare and contrast processes of spatial configuration between an ancient Maya city and its outlying areas through archaeological research at the site of El Palmar, Campeche, México. The results of excavations and artifactual analyses suggest that theatrical performances enacted repeatedly in outlying plazas did not merely mimic royal performances but had substantial effects on the constitution of political circumstances and cultural values in the El Palmar dynasty.

En las sociedades complejas incipientes, la plaza era un espacio crucial para la construcción de la comunidad. Las representaciones teatrales en la plaza no solo sirvieron para la legitimación política de los gobernantes ante el público, sino que también brindaron oportunidades para que personas con diferentes antecedentes pudieran negociar posiciones sociales y políticas. Este artículo examina cómo las experiencias vividas en la plaza central por las élites que no pertenecían a la realeza se materializaron en las zonas periféricas de la ciudad. Al hacerlo, comparo y hago un contraste de los procesos de configuración espacial entre una antigua ciudad Maya y sus áreas periféricas a través de la investigación arqueológica en el sitio de El Palmar, Campeche, México. Los resultados de las excavaciones y los análisis de artefactos sugieren que las representaciones teatrales presentadas repetidamente en plazas periféricas no sólo imitaron representaciones reales, sino que tuvieron efectos sustanciales en la constitución de las circunstancias políticas y los valores culturales en la dinastía El Palmar.

Introduction

The plaza is a fundamental spatial setting for community building in many early complex societies. Studies of ancient plazas have demonstrated that their subsequent social relations maintained or changed through those shared experiences and face-to-face interactions occurring during plaza events (Inomata, 2006; Tsukamoto & Inomata, 2014). These experiences and interactions, in turn, shape and reshape perspectives on how the polity should be. In this regard, performance and practice theories provide an important framework to analyze recursive relationships between practices and perspectives. Performance theory emphasizes the significance of interactions between performers and audience during an event (Bell, 1997; Coben & Inomata, 2006; Goffman, 1959). This theory views the audience not as passive recipients of the event but active evaluators who are capable of changing the course of history. From this framework, theatrical performance in the plaza is a dynamic process that provokes changes in cultural values and political realities. While the implication of plaza activities in social changes has been discussed, less attention has been paid to the question of how the evaluations of audience, most of whom lived in a city's outlying areas, were reflected in their subsequent bodily actions and perceptions. To a certain extent, the spatial and material settings of the city's outlying areas should represent people's face-to-face interactions, evaluations, consumptions, contestations, and remembrances of large spectacles they experienced in the city's main plaza. This paper assesses the degree to which the results of those negotiations were materialized in an early city's outlying areas.

I address this question through archaeological research at El Palmar. El Palmar is an ideal archaeological site for the study of plazas because there are numerous plazas in and around its civic-core or the Main Group. In the plazas,

successive rulers sponsored the erection of a considerable number of stone monuments that carved historical events with specific calendrical dates. The monuments also depict El Palmar's long dynastic sequences that helps us see rulers' specific theatrical performances. Moreover, investigations for a decade at the Guzmán Group, an outlying plaza compound of El Palmar's outlying areas or *plazuela* group, discerned who lived there. They were non-royal elites who possessed the title of *lakam*, "banner" and participated as ambassadors in the negotiation of alliances between the Snake dynasty (i.e., Calakmul), Copán, and El Palmar. Because of their important political position, these standard-bearers most likely attended or performed spectacles in the main plazas of El Palmar's civic-core or Main Group. Monica Smith (2018) states that intermediate elites were a key for deeper understanding the development of complexities in political organization and social relations in early cities of both the Old and New Worlds. Researchers have pointed out that elites who lived in the city's outlying areas played crucial roles in political organization of Classic Maya society (Houston and Stuart, 2001; Jackson, 2013; Webster et al., 1989). This paper examines how theatrical performance in large plazas were reflected in the formation and transformation of spatial and material settings of *plazuela* groups during the Classic period (AD 250-900).

Performance Theory

Performance theory has been broadly discussed among social scientists (Bell, 1992; Goffman, 1959, 1967; Hymes, 1975; Schechner, 1994; Tambiah, 1979; Turner, 1986), but its application to archaeological research is relatively recent. Inomata (2006; see also Coben & Inomata, 2006) has introduced the significance of examining theatrical performance, allowing archaeologists to explore the relationship between large public events

and the development of centralized polities. Following Hymes (1975, pp. 13-19), Inomata (2006, pp. 806) defines “performance as creative, realized, achieved acts which are interpretable, reportable, and repeatable in a domain of cultural intelligibility.” Performative acts are, *per se*, a citation of iterable and regulatory norms (Butler, 1993). In the study of theatrical performance, a crucial point of performance theory is to highlight interactions as media that create the sense of realities, affecting people’s perceptions and interpretations of a community. Inomata (2006, pp. 806) places particular emphasis on theatricality inherent in performance theory, which refers to “the quality of communicative acts that requires the presence of an audience acting as observers and evaluators” (see also Beeman, 1993, pp. 383-384). Theatricality distinguishes communicative acts consciously recognized by performers and an audience from unconscious acts of communication. Theatrical performance does not merely mirror and reproduce existing social norms, but creates new situations and social changes (Schechner 1994, pp. 626-632). The interaction among participants during public theatrical events produces emotional, perceptual, and interpretative outcomes that shape and reshape a collective sense of a symbolic reality (Bloch, 1974, pp. 59-60). Because performance theory sheds light on different social actors (performers, observers, evaluators, etc.), it allows us to enhance the significance of the practices of diverse actors and their interactions, and thereby we can examine how these interactions are interrelated with other social, political, and economic factors. A crucial contribution of performance theory is to place face-to-face interactions as central to the formation and transformation of politics and cultural values among different social segments.

The sociopolitical implications of theatrical performance emerge when this conscious action is examined with unconscious daily activities. Bourdieu’s

version of practice theory illuminates the significance of routine daily actions (Bourdieu, 1977). However, a problem lies in his theory of *habitus* that overemphasizes on unconscious bodily practice without considering people’s ability to evaluate the situation surrounding them and the potential consequences of their actions (Inomata & Triadan, 2009). In contrast, performance theory and Giddensian practice theory (1984) state the importance of reflexive monitoring and how it changes subsequent practice. Thus, we should examine how politically conscious practices and less conscious daily activities interwove their cultural values and political realities.

In Classic May society, large spectacles often took place in the center’s main plazas which could accommodate almost the entire population (Inomata 2006; Tsukamoto and Inomata, 2014). The main plaza was surrounded by *plazuela* groups where a substantial portion of the audience lived. The comparative study of the main plaza and *plazuela* group, therefore, elucidate cultural values and political realities in which people’s evaluation of theatrical performance in the main plaza was materialized.

Site Setting

The archaeological site of El Palmar is located in southeastern Campeche, Mexico (Figure 22.1). It consists of the Main Group and its surrounding architectural groups (Figure 22.2). Since 2007 Tsukamoto and Javier López Camacho have codirected the El Palmar Archaeological Project (Proyecto Arqueológico El Palmar in Spanish, hereinafter PAEP). The project aims to understand the relationships between urbanization processes and sociopolitical organizations in the Maya lowlands (Tsukamoto, Camacho, & Olguín, 2010). The PAEP has carried out surface surveys, airborne LiDAR mapping, horizontal and stratigraphic excavations, and artifactual analyses. Recent airborne LiDAR (Light Detection and

Ranging) mapping that covered 94 km² exhibits over 9,000 structures that form about 500 *plazuela* groups (i.e. a small plaza compound surrounding the Main Group). Although the population estimate is always problematic in archaeological research, the conventional method proposed by Canuto and his collaborators (2018), which calculates 4.6 person/structure, provide a relative basis for comparative analyses. Based on their method there were over 40,000 people lived in this area of 94 km². At the Main Group, surface surveys and topographic mapping have documented 8 plazas with diverse spatial settings and over 100 structures which include two pyramidal temples of 30 m and 29 m in height, a royal palace, and ballcourt. We also recorded 35 stelae and 14 altars in the plazas. Although epigraphic studies of these monuments are still in process, current data show that El Palmar had a dynasty with successive rulers at least from AD 514 until 820. Stratigraphic excavations provided even longer periods of occupation beginning from the Late Preclassic (300 BC-AD 250) to the Terminal Classic period (AD 800-900), with rapid urbanization occurring during the Middle Classic period (AD 400-600). During the urbanization process substantial plazas were constructed at the Main Group (Tsukamoto, 2014).

Epigraphic and archaeological studies suggest that the El Palmar dynasty was involved in inter-polity interactions over centuries. After the “Arrival” event in AD 378 (Stuart, 2000), southeastern Campeche, Mexico and northern Petén, Guatemala became arenas of dynastic upheavals (Martin & Grube, 2008). The Arrival event opened with a political intervention of Teotihuacan affiliates, Sihyaj K’ahk’ and Spearthrower Owl, in the Tikal dynasty. They replaced Tikal’s local ruler with Spearthrower Owl’s son. In AD 393, Sihyaj K’ahk’ presided over Río Azul, which is located 34 km south of El Palmar, by replacing a local ruler with a new dynastic line (Adams, 1990: 34). The political alliance

between Tikal and Río Azul appears to have continued at least during the Middle Classic period (AD 400-600). Becan, a major polity situated 50 km north of El Palmar, experienced political turbulence between AD 450-630, a time with material evidence of Teotihuacan influence. Several *plazuela* groups surrounding this site core were abandoned while populations dispersed into isolated mounds constructed in outlying areas (Thomas, 1981, pp. 99-100). This drastic shift of settlement patterns suggests that major ideological changes occurred at Becan during this period. A similar thing appears to have happened at El Palmar’s Main Group, but more data are needed to assess it.

El Palmar’s involvement in political interactions became more visible when the long adversary of Tikal, the Snake dynasty, intervened in southeastern Campeche polities. A powerful Snake king, Sky Witness, exercised his authority in this region through overseeing the accession of a local ruler in AD 561 at Los Alacranes, a site located 18 km southeast of El Palmar (Grube, 2008, pp. 193-195). The Snake dynasty’s political campaign continued in the region after the relocation of its capital in AD 635 from Dzibanche to Calakmul, the largest Maya city 50 km west of El Palmar (Helmke & Awe, 2016; Martin and Velázquez 2016).

The Late Classic period (AD 600-800) witnessed the emergence of non-royal elites in the Maya lowlands. Numerous titled elites were depicted on stone monuments and polychrome vessels (Houston & Stuart, 2001; Jackson, 2013; Lacadena, 2008; Stuart, 2010[1992]). Some of those elites lived in the city’s outlying areas, but played critical roles in the formation and transformation of political organization and inter-dynastic interactions (Golden, Scherer, Muñoz, & Vásquez, 2008; Webster, 1989). At El Palmar one of the surrounding *plazuela* groups is the Guzmán Group, an outlying group located 1.3 km north of the Main Group. The PAEP intensively explored the Guzmán Group during four field seasons between 2010-

2016.

Theatrical performance at El Palmar's Main Group

Of the eight plazas three plazas are essential in this study. The largest public plaza is the Great Plaza which could accommodate about 36,000 people in a single event. The plaza is formed by Temple I, the largest temple at El Palmar, part of a royal palace, and other middle-sized structures. Because the stairway of Temple I appears not to face the Great Plaza, monumental structures PM5 and PM8 set stages for theatrical performance. There are 11 stelae and two altars placed in the Great Plaza and three of the 11 stelae represent rulers' theatrical performance (Figure 22.3). Stela 10, which dates to December 1st, AD 711, is located at the northeast of the plaza. It depicts an important ruler of the El Palmar dynasty, Upakal K'inich, who was also mentioned in different inscriptions. Stela 10 had a cache in which Eric Thompson (1936) found the master piece of anthropomorphic eccentric chert that resembles those found at Copan. About 25 m south of Stela 10 finds Stela 8 which also represents Upakal K'inich who conducts a sprinkle-incense ritual on October 9th, AD 721 in front of a captive, a typical representation of the Maya king as a warrior (Figure 22.4). This iconographic representation suggests that warfare was one of the important elements for spectacles and kings' theatrical performance. Decades later in AD 800 Stela 16 was erected with the same ritual practice, but its ruler's name is too eroded to read. These stelae, together with other stelae and altars, suggest that theatrical performances took place repeatedly in the Great Plaza at least from AD 711 to 800.

Plaza E, the second largest plaza at the Main Group, is adjacent to the Great Plaza. If people used these two plazas for large spectacles, they could accommodate over 50,000 people, meaning that the entire population in the area of 94 km² could have participated in and experienced large

Figure 22.1.

Map representing the location of El Palmar and sites mentioned in the text.



Figure 22.2.

Map of El Palmar, showing the location of the Main Group and Guzmán Group.

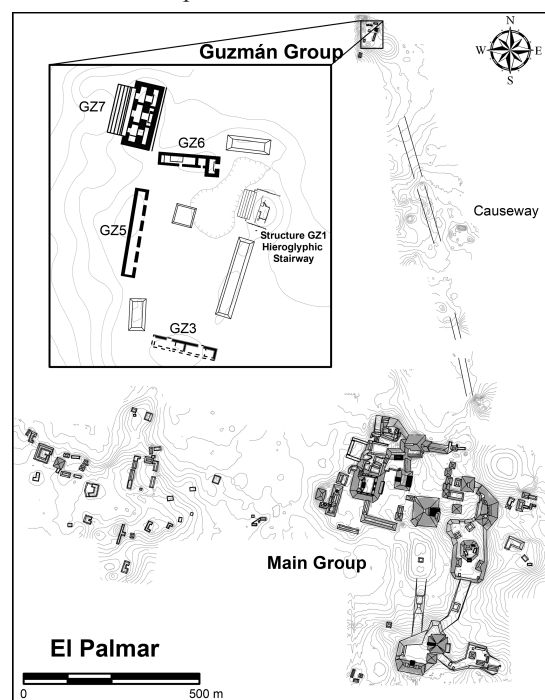


Figure 22.3.

Map of Royal Palace with the location of carved monuments.

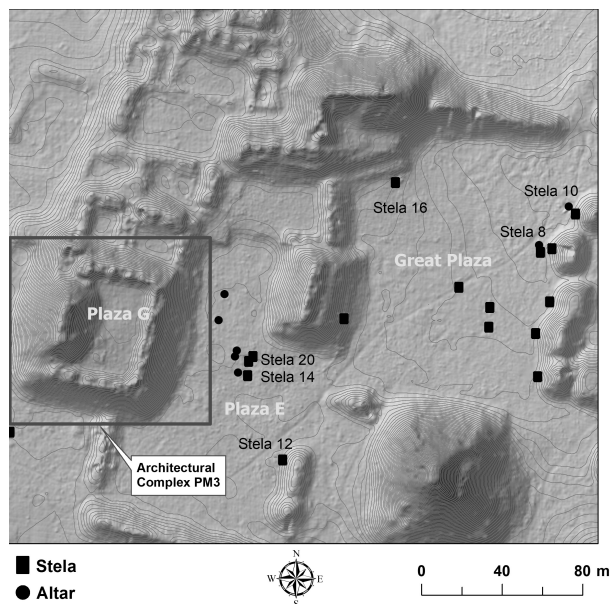


Figure 22.4.

Stela 8, El Palmar.



spectacles simultaneously. The Architectural Complex PM3 provides a stage for theatrical performances at Plaza E. Stratigraphic excavations date the first construction of these plazas to the Middle Classic period (AD 400-600). At Plaza E we found four stelae and five altars. Stela 20 represents a ruler whose name was completely eroded but survived glyphs depict that he is the 17th ruler of the El Palmar dynasty. The date when the stela erected is not clear, but was probably October 17th, AD 514 (9.4.0.0.0.). Stela 12, which is located at the east end of the plaza, depicts the most powerful Snake dynasty's king, Yuknoom Ch'een II, who probably oversaw a royal dance of an El Palmar ruler in Plaza E between AD 639-686 (Esparza Olguín and Tsukamoto 2011). The next to Stela 20 is Stela 14 which records a sprinkle-incense ceremony on May 3rd, AD 820. At the west end of Plaza E is Plaza G which is located 10 m above Plaza E and that has highly restricted accesses. The west end of Plaza G was closed by a 26 m high structure that was probably a royal residence, although it remains underexplored. Thus, the Main Group has both public and private plazas for theatrical performances that took place during the Middle and Late Classic periods (AD 511-820).

Theatrical performance at El Palmar's Guzmán Group

The Guzmán Group has a small plaza formed by a temple (Structure GZ1) and six rectangular structures (Structures GZ2-6, 9) (see Figure 22.2). The excavation of Structure GZ1 detected a stairway with extensive inscriptions that depict a history of non-royal elites (Tsukamoto, Camacho, Valenzuela, Kotegawa, & Olguín, 2015; Tsukamoto and Esparza Olguín, 2015). The stairway was designed for theatrical performance by amplifying the depth of each step more than functional purposes (Tsukamoto 2014). The inscriptions suggest that standard-bearers lived in the Guzmán Group over generations and their protagonist served as an ambassador for alliances

between El Palmar, Calakmul, and Copán in AD 726 (Tsukamoto and Esparza Olguín, 2015). Surprisingly, the texts emphasize the connection with the foreign dynasty of Copán leaving El Palmar's ruler aside. The spatial setting also attests to the significance of the Snake dynasty for standard-bearers because of the temple's entrance as well as the stairway that point not to the Main Group of El Palmar but Calakmul. The center of the stairway represents the emblem glyph of the Snake dynasty, which is flanked by the royal titles of Copan and El Palmar.

Horizontal and stratigraphic excavations revealed that the Guzmán plaza was formed around the time when the hieroglyphic stairway was attached to the temple. Before the plaza construction, some modest houses with *chultunob*, bottle-shaped underground chambers used probably for water catchment or storage, were randomly scattered on the plaza. The excavations of a structure which closes the north end of the plaza recovered an anthropomorphic eccentric chert that indicates a shared practice between the Main Group and Guzmán Group. Thompson's eccentric was deposited in AD 719 while that of the Guzmán Group was part of termination deposits that took place around AD 830-850. Elsewhere, I noted that the Guzmán Plaza and Plaza G of the Main Group had about the same accommodation size, most likely designed for accommodating elite population (Tsukamoto, 2014). The excavations and chemical residue analyses of plaza floors at the Guzmán Group also revealed that feasting took place repeatedly during the Late Classic (Tsukamoto, 2017). Burials facing the plaza tend to contain large serving plates and bowls, probably used for feasting in the plaza. Chemical residue analyses of floors recovered from the Guzmán plaza and its surrounding structures indicate that feasting was part of theatrical performance. Structure GZ7, which is located northwest of the Guzmán plaza, resembles the Architectural Complex PM3 of the Main Group in terms of spatial layout. Structure GZ7

also has a restricted patio formed by a dominant structure (Structure GZ7a) in its east end and other rectangular structures (Structure GZ7b and c) surrounding the patio. Recent excavations at Structure GZ7 suggest that this residential building was occupied by leaders of standard-bearers (*lakamob*) who built it between AD 720 and 800. It consists of six rooms, three of which contained masonry benches. A bench located at the central room of the structure is characterized by a throne with backrest. I suspect that the main structure that closes the east end of Plaza G at the Main Group also contains a similar throne. As with the main temple of the Guzmán Group, a crucial spatial setting is that Structure GZ7s points not to the Main Group of El Palmar but to Calakmul.

Discussion

Periodic theatrical performances and daily practices presented in and around the Guzmán plaza provide clues as to how standard-bearers evaluated, consumed, contested, and remembered large spectacles that took place in the plazas of the Main Group. Rapid urban growth with the construction of the Great Plaza, Plaza E, and Plaza G at the Main Group slowly changed experiences and perceptions of ritual participants who lived in its outlying areas. During this period, at the Guzmán Group daily practices and periodic rituals of standard-bearers did not take place in a formal plaza, but in and around scattered houses. Although those activities might have been partially shared among standard-bearers, they were not attached to the plaza as with those of the Main Group. A critical time was when the Snake dynasty relocated its capital to Calakmul in AD 635 and its powerful ruler, Yuknoom Ch'een ascended the throne in AD 636 (Helmke & Awe, 2016). As depicted on Stela 14, the royal dance of an unknown El Palmar ruler was supervised by Yuknoom Ch'een, the event that was most likely witnessed by El Palmar's entire population,

including standard-bearers. Through this theatrical performance, the audience would have realized that their dynasty was under the umbrella of Yuknoom Ch'een who intervened other Maya dynasties. Standard-bearers built the substructure of the main temple together with other residential structures at the Guzmán Group around this time. The defeat of the Snake dynasty against Tikal in AD 695 provided an opportunity for El Palmar to be a central player of dynastic interactions. El Palmar ruler Upakal K'inich sponsored to erect two stelae at the Main Group. He was also involved in the negotiation of alliances between Calakmul, Copan, and El Palmar, as his name is depicted on Drawing 29 of the Naj Tunich cave, which is located between El Palmar and Copan. The eccentric flint found in front of Stela 10 suggests that Upakal K'inich went to Copan and received this from Copan's king as evidence of his visit.

Standard-bearers consciously and unconsciously recognized the significance of theatrical performance in the Main Group's plazas. They created a plaza in their residential area and attached the hieroglyphic stairway to their main temple. The repeatedly conducted feasting during which they could have performed political speeches on the hieroglyphic stairway. Unlike the Main Group, the audience was not targeted to the entire population at the Guzmán Group but to the elites. Their daily practices were attached to the plaza, including administrative duties which were partially visible from the plaza. Simultaneously, they mimicked the royal space of Plaza G by building Structure GZ7 outside the plaza. They also possessed an anthropomorphic eccentric flint which was probably articulated with the ritual of Stela 10.

Despite its similarities in the spatial settings, cultural values and political realities between royal elites and standard-bearers seem to be different and they are reflected in the spatial and material settings. There are some similarities of

the spatial settings between the Main Group and Guzmán Group, but the latter spatial layout was designed for the representation of Calakmul and Copan. Carved monuments at both the Main Group and Guzmán Group depict El Palmar's dynastic lines, but their political meanings appear different. While Stela 20 of the Main Group emphasizes the El Palmar dynasty, the hieroglyphic stairway highlights Calakmul and Copan in addition to standard-bearers. Even though El Palmar rulers demonstrated their images as warriors or supreme priests, standard-bearers viewed the world which the Snake dynasty ordered, leaving El Palmar rulers aside.

Conclusion

This paper examined the formation of cultural values and political realities through theatrical performances in the plaza. An important study remained underdeveloped was to address the question of how the audience evaluated, consumed, contested, and remembered large spectacles. I examined this question through activities occurring in the city's outlying group. Future excavations at the Main Group will provide additional information on the city's civic-core. More specifically, excavations at the Architectural Complex PM3 will provide insights into understanding everyday practices of royal families and their transformations which were articulated with political turbulence.

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